

## US still hopeful that n-deal will move forward

The India-US civil nuclear deal remains stalled due to unrelenting opposition from the Indian coalition government's leftist supporters, but the US is still hopeful and would like to see it move forward.

'... There are internal political considerations in India that still have not been resolved, and that really is something for the Indian government to do,' US State Department spokesman Tom Casey said Thursday. 'But we continue to be hopeful, and we'd like to see it move forward.'

Asked to comment on a reported remark by US ambassador to India David Mulford that the deal could still be finalised if Indian approval came through by June, he said he had not any recent comments on this by the envoy 'but we all would like to see this arrangement be finalised'.

'We do continue to believe it's in the best interests of the United States and India and the best interests of global non-proliferation regimes,' Casey added.

Mulford told The Hindu Monday that while the nuclear deal is 'not dead', it is 'down to the last days'. But if Indian approval came through by June, the US Congress would still be able to process it.

Mulford also made it clear that while the US Congress could rework its timetables, time was running short. 'We're clearly at the point where there is, practically speaking, only a very narrow window to complete the process.'

The US administration had earlier indicated that India's decision to go forward had to come through early this year to meet the schedule prescribed by Congress when it passed the Hyde Act, the US enabling law.

'As time has gone on, it's become clear that we can no longer meet that timetable ... But the United States Congress is an institution which has a small core of leaders who can decide to approach something differently,' the US ambassador explained, pointing to the comments of recent Congressional visitors indicating that they understand the delay and respect the local process.

India still needs to sign a safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and persuade the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) that controls global nuclear commerce to change its guidelines for India.

The nuclear deal must clear these two hurdles before the implementing 123 agreement finalised last July can come up for final approval by the US Congress. But with legislators getting into election mode for the November polls, it would be a race against the clock.

India has finalised a safeguards agreement with the IAEA, but has not yet signed it. The Left parties, which are opposed to the Indo-US nuclear deal, had allowed the government to negotiate the treaty text with the IAEA but prevented it from signing it without their approval.

The NSG meeting in Berlin next Monday is also unlikely to take up the issue of amending its guidelines for India unless India signs the agreement with IAEA.

External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee tried but failed to convince the Left leaders to allow India to sign the agreement with the IAEA when he met them May 6. Another meeting between the two sides is due May 28. But the Left parties have made it clear that there is no change in their stand. They are meeting later Friday to finalise their stand for the May 28 meeting.

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government is unlikely to take the chance of going ahead in finalising India's agreement with the IAEA without the Left's approval as the Communists provide crucial support in parliament.

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